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## The Patron Saint of Infants

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## THE PATRON SAINT OF INFANTS

Irena had a baby, but her fiancé Eddie didn't come to the hospital when it was born, which meant that the wedding was probably off. Her two brothers were in the waiting room, nervous, drinking coffee from flimsy paper cups. "Like two fathers in some kind of a polyandrous marriage," that's what my husband Dex said.

Aleksy, the short one who worked in shipping at Office Depot and paid the rent on the apartment all three siblings lived in, had a flask of whiskey hidden in his coat pocket. After the coffee, he tipped a drink into their cups.

"*Na zdrowie!*" he said. "To life!" It was Aleksy who told Irena that their mother would have wanted her to marry the man who got her pregnant. He was also the one who paid for Irena's doctor and bought the diapers in advance.

Fabian, the tall brother whom Dex sometimes had to bail out of jail when he got booked for petty larceny, had a christening gown that he kept smoothing out across his knees, stroking the ruffled fabric and beaded embroidery. God knows where he got it. He wouldn't tell Dex. All he would say was that in Poland the Godfather gave his Godchild its first swaddling clothes. The doctor told the brothers that if they put on surgical masks and scrubs, they could watch the birth, but they didn't want to see their sister like that, so they all stayed in the waiting room and Irena gave birth to the baby by herself.

Dex and I got married the year after we graduated from college. We had the ceremony at the United Church in Crystal Lake where my parents were married and we had the reception in the basement where they usually held Sunday school and Easter Supper. Dex's mother had pressured him to get married before we moved in together, but my parents had paid for the small wedding. Neither of us thought it was a good idea to spend a lot of money on a wedding. Instead, we starting saving for our house. Dex wanted a place that belonged to him, that wasn't rented like all the apartments that he shared with his mother when he was growing up. Not to say

that his mother didn't do well by him. It was for his sake that she worked herself into an early old age at the complaints department at Sears. She also taught him the importance of education. It would be a lie to say that my parents didn't have misgivings about Dex because of the way he grew up, but he proved himself to be a responsible husband and a sensible man.

The day after the baby was born, while Irena was still in the hospital, Irena's fiancé Eddie locked himself and a man named Michael Pelleire inside the men's room at the Matador Bar and beat him unconscious. When the bouncers broke down the door, there was blood and teeth in among the urinal cakes. Eddie was sitting on the floor and cauterizing the lacerations on his arms with the cherry of a cigarette. Michael Pelleire had defended himself with his keys; Dex told me that the puncture wounds on Eddie's arms and chest were surprisingly deep. Most impressive though, Michael Pelleire had pierced Eddie's left cheek. In the photographs that the police took, one of Eddie's back molars showed through the jagged tear in his face. "A key hole," the cops joked in the Emergency Room while a nurse sedated Eddie and sewed him up.

Eddie was lucky that Michael Pelleire didn't die. The surgeons were able to stop the bleeding in his brain. And when he woke up he wasn't a simpleton, though he couldn't remember the night of the assault. The police called it attempted murder and posted an officer outside Eddie's hospital room. When Dex went to pick up Irena and the baby from the hospital and take them home to Aleksy's apartment, the police officer let Irena look in through the door at her fiancé. His face was stitched up like a baseball. "Better late than never," she said.

I was making dinner when Dex got home and told me the news. I ruined a pot of asparagus, left it on the stove until all the water boiled away. I just stood in the middle of my kitchen, transfixed. Dex kept shaking his head, like he was disagreeing with the words as they came out of his mouth. Like he couldn't believe it. He said that no one in the neighborhood knew Michael Pelleire, but Dex had found out that he was a plumber from Glen-



dale Heights. He and some buddies had been drinking in a bunch of West Garfield Park establishments the night of the incident. No one had seen him talk to Eddie at the Matador Bar and the waitresses said he'd tipped well and kept his hands to himself. Dex clipped the items about Eddie out of the *Chicago Tribune*, which deemed the violence yet another example of the neighborhood's deterioration. "Why'd he do it?" I asked Dex. He didn't know.

At the baptism, baby Nicholas—Fabian chose the baby's name and Irena let him be Godfather, despite Aleksy's obviously superior qualifications—vomited on his white organza dress when the priest poured the second handful of water over him. Irena wore the ivory suit that she'd bought for her wedding and watched impassively as her son was born into the Catholic Church. Fabian sobbed through the ceremony. "I will cry also at my Godson's wedding," he said.

Dex pointed out Eddie's mother among the attendees, a hard-bitten woman with Eddie's oversized, raw bones. The baby had Eddie's last name, but Eddie's mother was seated in the back pew. The Anderssens had never been particularly religious, and they were Lutheran if they were anything. Dex had grown up with Eddie, Irena, and her brothers in West Garfield Park. Even though we now lived in a different part of the city, the four of them always needed things from Dex and called him up, and he'd go back to the old neighborhood several times a week. I didn't go out there with him except for weddings, baptisms, and funerals, so it seemed like I spent most of my time there at St. George's even though Dex has given up Catholicism and joined the United Church when we got married.

Dex bought a brand new highchair for Nicholas for 170 dollars. We dropped it off when we gave Irena and the baby a ride home after the baptism. Dex was the only one with a car, so he did a lot of picking up and dropping off.

The night after the baptism, in the bathroom while I was preparing for bed and putting in my diaphragm, I thought, *Why is it always the girls*

*who aren't prepared for motherhood that get to have babies?* I have a college degree, a steady job at an elementary school, and I've have been married for four years. I could get paid maternity leave so we could still make the mortgage payments on the house.

After we turned out the lights and Dex slipped his hand onto my thigh, I asked him if seeing Nicholas made him want a baby of his own. "We'll see." He pulled his hand away. "Maybe after we've both been teaching for a few more years. Kids are expensive." We didn't make love that night. I waited until after Dex was asleep to go back to the bathroom and take out my diaphragm.

Irena went back to work at El Flamingo two weeks after the baby was born. She put Nicholas on formula even though Aleksy said that, back in Poland, mothers nursed their boys until their first haircut at three years old. In the evenings, when she left Nicholas at the apartment with Fabian, she must have put menstrual pads in her bra to keep the milk from soaking through the front of her shirt. Aleksy complained that he'd often come home to the flicker of the muted television and Nicholas awake as he suckled on Fabian's fingers while Fabian slept on the living room couch. "Irena's not a natural mother," Aleksy said.

Dex lent Irena money, partly to buy things for Nicholas and partly because her tips wouldn't be good until she got her figure back. Fabian had never held down a job, so he was the one who spent the most time with Nicholas. It was Fabian who called Dex in a panic whenever Nicholas had a cough or a rash. "I change the dirty diaper all the time," he'd say. "What am I doing wrong?" Dex would put me on the phone with him, as if because I'm a fourth grade teacher I knew something about babies.

"Calm down," I would tell Fabian, "it's just regular baby stuff. Don't worry, he's just fine."

Dex bought Fabian classical music CDs to play to Nicholas after I read him an article that said music increases infant intelligence. "That kid needs every chance he can get," Dex said.



When I met Dex in a sociology class, I would never have guessed he was from West Garfield Park. His accent betrayed nothing of his background, nor did his manners. He admitted later that he'd adopted certain tastes and etiquette. He taught himself to enjoy Japanese food and quit smoking. "You'd be disgusted about how far a superficial knowledge of wine will get you at a snobby dinner party," he said.

He didn't talk about his childhood with anyone except for me. Once after Nicholas was born, during dinner at my parents' house, I mentioned how generous Dex was with the people he'd grown up with: single mother Irena, crazy Eddie, good-hearted but slow Fabian. Dex's face got all red and he wouldn't look at me. "I've started volunteering with the United Way," my mother said. "Charity work is very rewarding, don't you think?"

Eddie was held in jail while he waited for his hearing. Dex went to visit him, but Eddie wouldn't see him. Irena didn't visit, even though Aleksy told her that she should let Eddie see "the fruit of his loins." On February 14, the day that Eddie and Irena had planned to get married, Eddie was transferred back to the hospital after he tried to cut out his tongue with a sharpened pen casing.

"The idiot was trying to escape his own skin," Dex said. But he didn't make it far with his tongue. It hemorrhaged like a dam had burst, and he lost a quart of blood before the guards noticed he was bleeding.

The hospital put him on suicide watch. Irena still didn't want to see him. "Why would I?" she asked. "He obviously doesn't want to talk."

Dex was reading in bed next to me, his magazine folded in half and held in one hand. I was pretending to read a historical romance, a bodice-ripper my mother had lent me. I turned to Dex and pushed his magazine down. "Does it scare you that you thought you knew Eddie, but you didn't know what he was really capable of?"

Dex sighed and checked the time on his alarm clock. "You want to talk about this right now?" he asked. I turned my bedside light off and turned my back to Dex. "Don't sulk," he said. He put his hand on my hip, a conciliatory gesture. "Yes, it scares me."

The judge said Eddie posed a danger to the public and wouldn't set bail for him. When the court-appointed defense attorney met with Eddie's mother, she asked Dex to come with her. "You were always a good friend to Eddie," she said, "and I don't trust lawyers in their fancy suits." I bought Dex a silk tie to wear to the meeting.

"Edvard won't explain why he did it," the lawyer told them. He thought that Eddie should try for an insanity plea.

"How do we know that Eddie wasn't just defending himself?" Mrs. Anderssen asked. The young lawyer was polite enough not to laugh in her face.

"You're lucky you haven't seen the crime scene photographs," Dex told me. "You can't think of Eddie the same way after you see them." The lawyer asked Dex to convince Irena to be a character witness for Eddie.

"I can't force her to help him," the lawyer said, "but she is the mother of his child. Weren't they going to get married?"

Eddie had always wanted Irena. Dex said it was obvious. Large, awkward, teenaged Eddie had walked Irena home from middle school until she turned thirteen and told him she was old enough to walk by herself. Three years later and drunk for the first time, Irena'd kissed Eddie in the parking lot of the 7-Eleven, but the next week she'd kissed Gregory Orlick. Eddie called her a whore, pinned her up against a wall in the Burger King, and rubbed the makeup off her eyes and lips with a spit-dampened napkin. They didn't speak much after that, but when Irena started working at El Flamingo after she turned eighteen, Eddie would sit at the bar with a Budweiser in his hand, and watch her as she earned her tips serving cocktails in her short skirt. Some nights after closing, he'd follow half a block behind her all the way from Independence Boulevard to S. Pulaski Road and watch from across the street as she turned lights on and off in the hallway, the bathroom, her bedroom. "It doesn't help that she's beautiful," Dex said. She had long pale hair and round blue eyes inherited from the peasant farmers of the Baltic coast. She looked innocent despite her sharp tongue. "With a tongue like that she should look more like Eddie," Dex said. "You know,



hatchet-faced.”

Baby Nicholas was also beautiful. I saw a Sears portrait of Irena seated with the baby on her knee and her brothers standing behind her wearing wholesome-looking sweaters. “All you’d need to add is a sheep or two to the tableaux and you’d have a messed-up nativity scene, with two Josephs,” said Dex.

“Does that make Eddie God?” I asked. Nicholas was six months old, all fat cheeks and curly blond hair. They could have put him on the labels for baby food; looking at him made me ache for a child of my own.

Fabian didn’t get into trouble anymore after Nicholas was born. Dex would see him at the grocery store buying cabbage and canned beets and pushing Nicholas in a second-hand stroller. He told Dex that Nicholas loved Borscht even more than Nicholas’s poor departed grandmother, “bless her soul.” Fabian had cared for his mother while she slowly died of uterine cancer. Aleksy said Fabian had bleached the blood out of their mother’s sheets when she started bleeding like a teenaged girl again. Dex said Fabian had made food for her that she couldn’t eat as the cancer metastasized inside her abdomen and gave her the thin limbs and bloated belly of a starving child. That was before I met Dex, back when he, Eddie, Fabian and Aleksy were all still in high school. Fabian used to go with his mother to have fluid drained from where it gathered just beneath her skin; the doctors would tap her like a tree. Dex said it wasn’t lost on Fabian that his mother’s illness had originated in the same place that he had, and somehow he must have felt responsible. Fabian was the only one with her when she died; her lungs filled up with fluid and she drowned in front of him on the hospital bed. Fabian didn’t call for a doctor.

“He just watched her die?” I asked. Fabian had climbed out the 3rd story window of the hospital room and walked home to tell Irena that their mother was in heaven.

“Fabian was never right after that,” Dex said. The siblings had no other family in America. Everyone was back in Poland. If Aleksy hadn’t been eighteen, Fabian and Irena would have had to go into foster homes



when their mother died. Dex had to do what he could for them, even after he left the neighborhood to get a teaching certificate at the University of Chicago. That's why I didn't mind that Dex was always driving out there, why I didn't begrudge the time they demanded. I didn't know anyone as unlucky as those three, and their bad luck kept multiplying, spreading like a disease.

No one had known that Irena had finally surrendered to Eddie's attentions until after her belly started to show. Not even her brothers. When Aleksy figured out what was going on, he demanded to know who her boyfriend was. He locked her in her room for a weekend and she missed two shifts at work before she told him. Fabian delivered plates of meat dumplings and noodles to her. "For the baby," he explained.

Aleksy didn't believe her when she said it was Eddie. "But you've never liked Eddie," he said, "I thought you hated him."

Irena shrugged. "Eddie would do anything for me," she said.

"We'll see about that," said Aleksy.

Eddie agreed to marry Irena. "I love her," he said. "I would have married her anyway." He still lived with his mother, but he started saving for an apartment for them to live in after the baby came. It was summer then, and there was a lot of work for him in construction. Dex and I went to the engagement party. Fabian festooned the dingy living room with white crepe-paper streamers and served sparkling wine in mismatched tumblers. Irena consented to a traditional hand-tying over a loaf of bread. Aleksy did the honors and joined Eddie and Irena together at the wrist with a satin ribbon.

"My brothers are more superstitious than old women," Irena said. "They're practically pagans." In photographs from the party, Irena looks like a porcelain doll next to hulking Eddie, her lips smiling and her eyes blank. Eddie seemed happy.

Dex said, "He looks like a cat that swallowed the canary." Eddie drank too much and, after Irena went to bed, I overheard Eddie confess

to Dex that one night, months before, when he'd followed Irena from the bar to make sure that she got home safe, she'd left the bedroom curtain open and let him watch her undress. She stood in front of the window and pressed her palm to the glass before she switched off the lamp. Eddie had waited outside all night for something else to happen, even though it was November and cold. He'd walked home in the grey twilight of early dawn, certain that Irena could love him. He followed her home again two nights later, allowing her the usual distance of half a block, and she stopped and waited for him to catch up.

"Why deny the inevitable?" Irena said—Eddie found this line very funny in the retelling, he laughed until his eyes were wet slits—and they'd fucked in the parking lot behind her apartment building between two parked cars with only her long winter coat protecting her back from the icy cement.

When we got into the car to drive home, I asked Dex if he'd ever felt like Eddie felt about Irena. "I feel that way about you," he said.

"No, not like this," I said. "You know, crazy. Unhealthy."

Dex took his eyes off the road to look at me, like he was trying read my thoughts, then he said, "I guess I'm not that kind of man." Out the window, we passed a boarded-up brick tenement bordered by an empty lot that had been turned into a community garden, squalor and an attempt at rehabilitation side by side.

Irena refused to appear in court, but Aleksy, Dex, Mrs. Anderssen, and a psychologist who the lawyer found all testified that Eddie was crazy. No one asked Fabian to be a witness and he stayed home with Nicholas. The courtroom reminded me of St. Georges. The seats were like pews. Michael Pelleire sat as far away from Eddie's friends and family in the gallery as he could and he used a cane when he walked down the aisle. A dentist had fixed his teeth up pretty nice. Mrs. Anderssen told a story about how Eddie had been put in a psychiatric hospital when he was a third grader after he'd broken two of his teacher's fingers. "He was a male teacher though," Mrs.



Anderssen said, "I don't think he'd ever hurt a lady." Eddie still wouldn't speak. He sat silently at the defendant's table wearing an ill-fitting suit and his scarred face.

"He looks like a real monster, doesn't he?" Dex whispered to me. Eddie wouldn't look up at any of the people he knew, not even his mother. He just stared down at his oversized knuckles laid out on the dark tabletop. The psychologist bandied about terms like late on-set schizophrenia and antisocial behavior disorder and the judge said that Eddie was not fit to stand trial. I watched Michael Pelleire cry after the ruling was handed down. Eddie just stood up and followed the bailiff out of the room, stiff-legged from hours of sitting. I asked Dex if he really thought Eddie was crazy. "I don't think so," he said. "It's something else." Eddie went to live on the forensic ward at the HartGrove Hospital.

For several months, everything seemed settled. "Any news about Irena?" I'd ask Dex, but there wasn't any. Dex spent more time at home. He replaced the sink in the powder room and repainted the upstairs hallway in Robin's Egg Blue. On days when the spring weather was especially nice, we drove to antique stores in Manteno to admire chest of drawers and vintage porch swings we couldn't afford. "I think we could afford this," I said, running my finger through the dust on the rail of an old crib.

"Maybe we could," Dex said.

Irena started seeing a man named Luis who she met at El Flamingo. "He's a businessman," Dex said. "He's rich. He has an apartment here and a house in Costa Rica." Luis was thirty-eight years old and Irena was only twenty. Dex didn't trust him. Luis flew Irena and Nicholas out to Puerto Limon for a week.

Fabian said Luis was good to Nicholas, bought him toys. Still, Fabian was scared that Irena might move to Costa Rica and take Nicholas. He told us as much when we took him and Nicholas to the Navy Pier to watch the Fourth of July fireworks over Lake Michigan. "Nicholas needs a real father though," Fabian said, "a boy should have a real father." He stroked Nicholas's round scalp when he spoke, worried the baby's curls with his



fingers. Nicholas was almost a year old, and Fabian had never cut Nicholas's hair, so it was growing long, past his ears.

Aleksy didn't think Irena and Luis were moving too fast like Dex did. "You don't just date a woman who has a child," he said.

Irena liked Puerto Limon. "I could learn Spanish," she said. "It never gets cold there. I could live like a queen."

On our way to Crystal Lake to visit my parents, I found a dozen photographs of Nicholas in the glove compartment of Dex's car and he told me that he'd been visiting Eddie at HartGrove. "They're safer if I hold on to them," said Dex. "The other patients steal things." He said he'd been driving Mrs. Anderssen there once a week and then after a few weeks, instead of waiting in the car, he'd accompanied her past the electronic doors and sat with the two of them in a day room with windows made of Plexiglas. "Not only can't you jump out the window," he said, "you can't break it and use it as a weapon either." He said he had the pictures of Nicholas for Eddie.

"Does Eddie speak?" I asked him.

"He's on medication, he's getting better," Dex said.

"Why didn't you tell me you were visiting Eddie?" I asked. He didn't say.

I'd had lunch with a friend from college and she told me about her job and the new house she'd bought in Highland. I ended up telling her about Dex and West Garfield Park. "He really loves his friends, in spite of everything," I'd told her.

"You don't get upset that he goes over there all the time?" she asked. "You don't worry that he's involved with criminals?"

I took a bite of salmon, carefully avoiding the parchment paper with my fork. "No, I think I'm lucky," I said. "He has a big heart."

In November, when Irena came to our house for the first time, she still had a tan from her second trip to Puerto Limon. Nicholas crawled on the carpet in the living room while we talked. He gripped the edge of the leather armchair where Dex sat, and then pulled himself up to standing. Irena had never been to our house before. She complimented the quality of

our furniture and the luxury of our neighbor's cars. She was wearing a navy blue dress cut low in the front, and she looked at once businesslike and ridiculously young as she sipped the tea I'd offered her. "If I want to take the baby with me to Costa Rica permanently," she said, "can Eddie's family stop me?" Nicholas wobbled and fell backward onto his diapered bottom, but he didn't cry.

"I'm not a lawyer," Dex said. Nicholas picked a piece of lint off the carpet and put it in his mouth. Irena used her index finger to fish it out again, and gave him a pacifier that she removed from her breast pocket.

"I could give him a cookie," I said. Irena shook her head no.

"What do you really want, Irena?" Dex asked. "You want to leave your brothers and the father of your child and move to a foreign country with a man you hardly know?"

Irena uncrossed and then re-crossed her tan legs. "Luis has more to offer me than any of you ever did," she said.

Nicholas died while Irena was at work. Aleksy came home and found him in his crib, blue-lipped and rigid. Aleksy said Nicholas's veins showed through his thin skin as if he were becoming transparent. When he picked him up, Nicholas felt heavy and cool to the touch. Aleksy yelled for Fabian, but Fabian wasn't in the apartment. Aleksy carried Nicholas into the kitchen and called the police, then he sat in one of the dinette chairs and waited with Nicholas's face tucked into the crook of his throat.

The paramedics unbuttoned Nicholas's striped cotton sleeper and found red marks on his legs and the bottoms of his feet, so the police brought Aleksy into the station for questioning. They also picked up Irena at El Flamingo. Irena called Dex and before he went to the police station, he gave me the keys to Aleksy's apartment so I could wait for Fabian in case he called.

"Why would he leave the baby?" I asked Dex. "Do you think he hurt him?" Dex said Fabian wouldn't hurt a fly.

When I arrived at the apartment, Fabian's coat and shoes were



missing, but his keys and his wallet were still on his dresser. The dryer was full of clean baby clothes, socks the size of tea bags. I turned on the radio and washed dishes in the cramped little kitchen and tried to lend a little order to their messy lives. If Nicholas had been my son, I would not have put him in the care of an idiot uncle. I wouldn't have let him live in a crummy little apartment in West Garfield Park.

Aleksy must have called Mrs. Anderssen and she must have called Eddie. There was a knock on Aleksy's apartment door. I slid back the dead bolt, and Eddie elbowed past me into the living room, craning his neck to look into the kitchen, the dinette area. "How did you get out of the hospital?" I wanted to know, but he didn't answer me.

"I'm going to kill him," he said. "Where is he?" He checked the bedrooms, opened the closet doors, even pushed back the shower curtain, then he stood in front of me and stared down his long nose at me. "Where's Fabian?" he asked. "Did he shake him? Did he drop him? Did he hit him? Did he bang his head?" Eddie gripped my upper arm and squeezed until my hand went numb. Dex said that Eddie had held Michael Pelleire by his hair and bashed his head against the edge of a porcelain sink until he stopped struggling.

"I don't know," I said. Eddie went to the crib and touched the yellow baby blanket with his big-knuckled hands.

"Fucking bitch," he said. "Fucking Polack whore." Then he told me.

Eddie had overheard Michael Pelleire boast to his friends that night at the Matador Bar that he was fucking another man's fiancé. "She can't get enough of it," Michael Pelleire had said. "She wants it all the time." Eddie had waited until Michael Pelleire got up to pee and then he'd followed him into the men's room. He didn't say a word; he just locked the door, and hit Michael Pelleire from behind as he stood in front of the urinal with his penis in his hand. Eddie'd been saving up that first blow for three days, ever since Irena told him that she didn't want to get married anymore and that she wasn't even sure that the baby was his.



"It could be yours," she said. "I won't know until I see if it grows up big and dumb." It had taken everything in him not to kill her. He didn't know who else the father could be, if it wasn't Michael Pelleire—and he didn't think it was now. Maybe it was Fabian. Why did Fabian act like the child's father? It could be anyone. Maybe Irena seduced Eddie because she'd already known she was pregnant. Eddie didn't know.

At the funeral, Irena wore dark sunglasses and hugged one of Nicholas's teddy bears throughout the ceremony. Luis sat on one side of her and Aleksy on the other. Luis would take Irena to Costa Rica a week after the funeral and after that we'd only hear about her from Aleksy when she got married, then when she had a daughter. The police had apprehended Eddie after he'd wandered through the backyards of several West Garfield Park homes trying cellar locks and twisting back door handles. He'd run from them, resisted arrest, but two of the cops tackled him to the ground and eventually he ended up back at HartGrove. Eddie's doctors didn't let him out for Nicholas's funeral. Instead HartGrove doubled their security in the outdoor smoking area where Eddie'd escaped over a ten-foot wall. Eddie's mother was at the funeral. Again, she sat in the back pew. Fabian didn't show up. The cops had an APB out on him for a few months. "They'll never find him," Dex said. "I bet he put rocks in his pockets and walked to the bottom of Lake Michigan." I preferred to imagine that he had left Chicago, and that he was living incognito in California, somewhere warm and far away.

The doctors had done a post-mortem examination on baby Nicholas and concluded that the cause of death was bacterial meningitis. The funeral was closed casket. Irena deferred to Aleksy who said they never had open caskets in Poland. But the funeral director let Irena look inside the three-foot wooden box. Nicholas wore a stitched-up incision—from the back of one ear, over the crown of his head, across his fontanel, and then down behind the other ear where they'd pulled away his scalp and then opened up his skull with an electric saw. His christening gown covered the

petechial rash on his legs that would have been the first signs of his illness. "His bleeding brain killed him," Dex said, "but he didn't suffer too much, just slipped into unconsciousness." After a little over a year on earth, Baby Nicholas went back to God with his chest cavity empty but for cotton wool.

The night after the funeral, I woke to Dex's sobbing. He hadn't turned on the light, but the mattress shook with his silent heaves and when I reached out I felt his pillow was wet with snot and tears. I put my palms on his naked back and tried to love him, tried to pity him. "St. Nicholas is the patron saint of babies," he said. "He can make them come back to life. He just kisses them and they come back to life. I loved Nicholas."

I was cruel then, and I said, "I don't believe in saints." But I was also generous, because I let him remain a good, sensible man. I never asked Dex if he'd loved Irena more than "like a sister" like he said. I didn't ask if they'd been lovers since they were teenagers or if they'd slept together just once. I don't know if she'd thought he was a way out of West Garfield Park or if he figured that she wasn't the kind of woman a good man should marry. It's possible that Dex never slept with Irena and that the baby was indeed Eddie's. I pitied her either way.

I never asked and we stayed together, so our life never resembled the sordid soap opera of West Garfield Park. But two years later, when Dex wanted to name our first daughter Nicola, I refused. "It's a trashy name," I said. "Besides, who wants to think of sad stories every time they look at their child."